

Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the ceremony of celebration of the 100th anniversary of Georgia's First Democratic Republic

Mister President,

Mister Prime Minister,

Mister Speaker,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It is a great honour indeed to be with you here today on this very emotional occasion. Today's centenary Independence Day is a historic moment for your great European nation.

The journey has not always been easy. The road to freedom never is.

But Georgia is a proud country, built on the courage and the ambition of its people.

In the last century, you took your future in your own hands. You chose hope over fear. And you never stopped fighting for your independence and your freedom until it was firmly restored.

As I stand here today, there can be no greater tribute than to say that a century on, Georgia has more than lived up to the spirit of 26 May 1918.

While the history of the Georgian people goes back millennia, that day, a century ago, modern Georgia was born.

A country built from the moment of its independence on the principles of democracy, equality and respect for human rights – values on which Europe is based today. These are not just words, these are not just aspirations. For all of us, these are enduring commitments. Through thick and thin, through conflict and pain, the Georgian have always stayed true to these values, making you what you are.

I think of the fierce fighting and the long resistance to Soviet occupation and the efforts to strengthen your democracy.

This is the way you have honoured the spirit of 1918, this is what defines you as a country. And it is what makes our association and partnership such a natural one.

Georgia is a country that has always been part of Europe and has always looked towards Europe.

We are linked by history and by geography. Our fates and our destinies have long been intertwined.

But I want this special occasion to be the start of the next chapter in our common story.

I have always argued that the European Union must send a message of hope to Georgia and especially to its youth.

So I want us to break down more of the barriers that still exist between us, and step up our support to each other, building on the progress we have already achieved.

I am delighted that more than a quarter of a million Georgians have already visited Europe without a visa since March of last year. I hope many more will visit us soon.

I also hope that many more will join the thousands of Georgian teachers and students that have come to Europe to study or teach thanks to the Erasmus+ programme. I look forward to the first students being welcomed at the new European School in this city this September.

Georgia and the European Union always stand up for each other. We will always support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. And standing in front of your brave soldiers, I also want to thank you for Georgia's invaluable role in EU peace-keeping operations, serving noble causes.

Long live Georgia, love live Europe! May they live together forever.

Thank you.